Opening the black box of the organization: Socio-material practices of geopolitical ordering

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Abstract

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Keywords: organizations, critical geopolitics, actor-network theory (ANT), performance, materiality

Introduction: the black box of the organization

Whether it is foreign ministries, universities, newspapers or think tanks, the EU, the UN, NATO, Al-Qaida, or NGOs, grassroots initiatives and social movements, or the church – organizations fundamentally shape geopolitics. They are birthplaces for geopolitical strategies and future diplomats, they command troops or resist violence, start wars or negotiate peace, forge regional cooperation or force regional splits, protect the environment or exploit resources, orient public opinion and protest injustice. There is no major geopolitical issue in which organizations are not involved.

Yet, despite their indisputable importance for geopolitics, critical geopolitics all too often just assumes organizations as given actors without looking at what exactly fashions them with agency. Often, we simply accept that the EU has influence in its neighborhood, that NATO can command troops and that newspapers come up with and disseminate new, influential ideas. We focus our attention on the action or the word itself and tend to ignore what makes an action or utterance possible in the first place. Behind the façade of organizations, however, a plethora of humans and things need to be coordinated and brought together to make an organization capable of acting. Organizations are precarious entities and require permanent stabilizing and ordering to maintain their actorness (Law, 1994; Weick, 2001).

This contribution argues that critical geopolitics would benefit from looking what happens behind the organizational façade, at the inside of organizations. This would mean laying bare the manifold socio-material processes of ordering by which organizations are assembled and become more or less coherent entities. Such an undertaking calls for explicating how particular contexts become the conditions of possibility for the emergence of organizations and organizational action (Kuus, 2011b). It is some of the original description of the task and purpose of critical geopolitics that resonates well with the intent of this paper: critical geopolitics writes against "organized totality" (Ó Tuathail, 1994: 528) and seeks to unravel how geopolitical power is exercised; it intervenes against the God trick of seeing everything from nowhere in favor of a situated reasoning (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998).

Opening the black box of the organization then must be at the heart of the critical geopolitics agenda. I use the metaphor of the black box in a dual sense here. First, in the classic one of calling for examining and theorizing the inside, the mechanisms of organizational agency and, second, in the specific sense that Michel Callon and Bruno Latour use the term to think of organizations as macro-actors which are no more than the sum of a multitude of smaller elements linked together.

> A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes – modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects – the broader the construction one can raise. … Macro-actors are micro-actors seated on top of many (leaky) black boxes (Callon and Latour, 1981: 285).

After a review and critique of work on organizations in critical geopolitics, the paper mobilizes ideas from actor-network theory (ANT) to develop a concept of organization as the ordering of socio-material networks – arrangements of human and material elements that work together towards a shared mission. These actor-networks are heterogeneous, i.e. made up of human and non-human elements – a proposition which is the hallmark of ANT – which are to be treated symmetrically in an analysis that seeks to ascertain "which associations are stronger and which are weaker" (Latour, 1987: 140; see also Law and Hassard, 1999; Murdoch, 1997a, b, 1998). The paper concludes by sketching out a research map around four nodes that could orient future work on the socio-material practices of ordering that constitute organizations: the circulation of geopolitical ideas, the production of geopolitics, governance at a distance and technologies of ordering.

Organizations in critical geopolitics

Studies of organizations and their behavior and role in world politics are the traditional domain of the discipline of international relations (IR). After all, the relations between sovereign states are often conducted through international organizations and global problems are addressed through them. According to one perspective, "international governance *is* whatever international organizations *do*" (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986: 756). Even for those who do not subscribe to this all-encompassing take, international organizations play a crucial role in establishing

regimes of international governance. They can create norms and thus coordinate action in the international state system which might ultimately result in avoiding or settling conflicts and facilitating cooperation between states, for example with respect to common goods.

Most of this research, adopting a statist-functionalist approach, has treated international organizations as serving the interests of and deriving power from states (e.g. Haas, 1964). This situation has been conceived through a principal-agent model, in which international organizations are hired as agents to perform certain tasks for the principals of state governments (Nielson and Tierney, 2003). As such, the degree of authority and autonomy granted to them has been rather low (cf. Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). Studies looking at organizational processes and the dynamics inside organizations are rather the exception than the rule (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: ix; Ness and Brechin, 1988). Approaching organizations from a sociological perspective has only recently gained some currency, perhaps most prominently in Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) pioneering work on international organizations as authoritative bureaucracies.

For critical geopolitics, too, organizations are of central importance. In its call to move away from the state-centric analysis that had characterized classical geopolitics (e.g. Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998), critical geopolitics planted the seed for the engagement with organizations beyond the state and has thus extended the scope of research subjects considerably compared to IR. While governmental, transnational and international organizations represent an important type of organization (Bachmann, 2012 forthcoming), new actors have entered the geopolitical scene. Though organizations such as NATO, the United Nations or the EU are among the standard fare, NGOs, social movements, non-state armed actors such guerillas and paramilitaries or religious bodies have considerably extended the circle of the usual suspects as new loci of geopolitical power (e.g. Jeffrey, 2012 forthcoming).

Work that features organizations in critical geopolitics can be classified into three broad categories. In the first, organizations are producers of discourse and the analysis focuses on the content of meaningful geopolitical representations. In the

second, organizations are treated primarily as geopolitical agents. In the third, the focus is on the inside lives of organizations viewed as bureaucracies. *Figure 1* presents an attempt at situating these three categories in relation to other fields and perspectives on organizations.

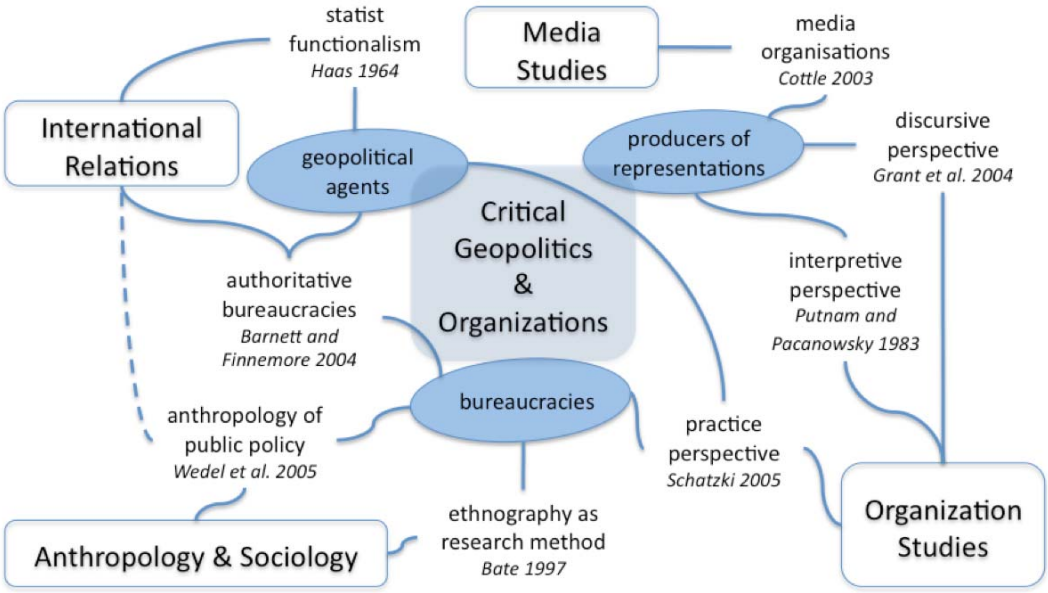

Figure 1: Research on organizations in critical geopolitics with links to related fields and perspectives

Organizations as producers of representations

The strand of research that looks at organizations as producers of representations commonly adopts an interpretive perspective, where the focus is on the creation and analysis of shared symbolic meaning – a perspective that is also prominent in the field of Organization Studies (cf. Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983 and Figure 1). Often, these studies operate with the concept of discourse as a linchpin and are concerned with how language becomes productive of geopolitical space (cf. also Grant et al., 2004 in Organization Studies). A number of studies can be classified into this rubric. Some pinpoint single organizations, such as the British Foreign Office (Dodds, 1994), the EU (Boedeltje and van Houtum, 2011; Jones and Clark, 2008), the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (Glasze, 2007), while others examine a multitude of organizations (e.g. Strüver, 2007). Some research

also analyzes how large organizations, such as the EU (Bachmann and Sidaway, 2009) or NATO (Kuus, 2009), are in turn represented and represent themselves in the media, in expert and scholarly opinion or in education. With the growing attention to popular geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008), media of various sorts – magazines, newspapers, podcasts, webpages, television, films – have also gained in salience as producers of representations (e.g. Dalby, 1996; Sharp, 1993). Each of those is tied to an organization, whether it is a TV channel, a studio, a publishing house and so on (cf. Cottle, 2003; Curran, 2000 and Figure 1).

An illustrative example of research in this category can be found in Dahlman and Brunn's (2003) article on organizational discourses in the wake of 9/11. The authors make the case for recognizing NGOs as "important agents in the production of ideational content and the circulation of contemporary global visions and political (re)orderings" (p. 256). On the basis of press releases and public statements immediately after 9/11 from a broad variety of 23 organizations, ranging from the WWF to the World Bank, the IOC and the World Council of Churches, they perform a discourse analysis of the framing of the terrorist events. Although the authors consider those organizational texts as "carefully constructed and intentional social acts" (p. 261), the analysis confines itself to the texts, while the organization as a site of meaning production remains mostly obscure. Megoran (2006b), on the other hand, presents a noteworthy exception here. In his analysis, he not only engages with the representation of the terrorist attacks in a service of the Church of England, but also traces how the service came to be in its particular form through interviews with key people who were involved in organizing it.

Organizations as geopolitical agents

The focus in this category is not so much on representations than on geopolitical action. Such action is typically pursued by large and powerful international organizations such as the EU, NATO or national governments that intervene in disputes and peddle their interests and agendas. Research in this rubric bears some resemblance to the statist functionalist perspective in international relations, where organizations are considered as serving the interests of and deriving their power from states (Haas, 1964 and Figure 1). These organizations are present in the major

conflicts, whether in Iraq, Bosnia or South Ossetia (e.g. Dodds, 2005; Ó Tuathail, 2008), in regional integration (Scott, 2011) or in the global struggle for souls (Agnew, 2010). In the shift to a geoeconomic logic, the traditional geopolitical agents are supplemented with influential geoeconomic organizations: the WTO, the IMF, multinational companies, credit rating agencies and so on (Agnew, 2012; Cowen and Smith, 2009).

But the focus can also fall on small organizations and non-traditional geopolitical actors that contest dominant orders, such as NGOs practicing protective accompaniment (Koopman, 2011) or non-state actors engaging in diplomacy (McConnell et al., 2012). Jeffrey (2007), for instance, examines how NGOs operating in post-war Bosnia compete for funding, scripting the post-conflict situation in ways that cater to the expectations and priorities of donors. Such work sometimes presents glimpses of an inside view of organizations, centering on the situated practices, the mundane actions and interactions of people in an organization (cf. Schatzki, 2005 and Figure 1). The last section of Jeffrey's study, for example, describes how NGOs "negotiate the more mundane bureaucratic requirements of the proposal writing process" (Jeffrey, 2007: 268) such as language difficulties that slow down the writing or the lack of designated office space. A significant part of work in this category, however, particularly that which relies on global international organizations, takes their actorness for granted: the micro-elements of the organization disappear behind the whole and agents appear as coherent entities.

Bureaucracies: inside lives of organizations

The third category delineates an emerging body of work in critical geopolitics that examines the inside lives of organizations, typically as bureaucracies. It tries to get a sense of the social processes in organizations and how they shape particular geopolitical outcomes. Research in this category shares several features with the sociological approach to organizations in international relations that often cites Max Weber's (1947) seminal work on the iron cage of bureaucracy. It views organizations as authoritative bureaucracies operating on the basis of standardized rules and procedures, hierarchical division of labor and deployment of expertise,

and exhibiting a considerable degree of autonomy from their founders (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004 and Figure 1). The studies that adopt such a perspective, however, are still few (e.g. Koch, 2009; Mathiason, 2007). In some aspects, this work coalesces with the anthropology of public policy (Shore and Wright, 1997; Shore et al., 2011), which is interested in the policy formation process in organizations, employing ethnography as a research method (Bate, 1997). With its concern with the social processes that constitute organizations, there is considerable affinity with a practice perspective on organizations (see *Figure 1*).

In critical geopolitics, the few studies that have looked at the social processes that form organizations have engaged with the production of geopolitical knowledge and geopolitical subjectivities. Such work, for example, has studied the processes of policy-making in the EU (Clark and Jones, 2011; Kuus, 2010, 2011b) or the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Sidaway, 1998) through elite-level interviews and the practices of education and geopolitical subjectivation at universities through ethnographic research (Müller, 2011). Sidaway (1998) examined the negotiation processes and meetings in the SADC, finding that "procedure remains all important" (p. 565) and eventually becomes content. He devotes particular attention to how sovereignty is enacted through the continuous performance of summits, meetings and issuing of documents and statements. In a similar vein, Kuus (2010, 2011b, c) investigates the production of EU policies in Brussels and the place-specific and individual dynamics that shape it, using interviews with Commission officials. She draws our attention to the mundane nature of bureaucratic policy-making beyond impersonal rules: how knowledge claims need to be articulated in specific ways to be accepted, how the recognition of expertise is a function of personal contacts and command of the vocabulary of Eurospeak.

However, most research in critical geopolitics that involves organizations has tended to assume an outside view of organizations: "[b]ureaucratic procedures that remain invisible in speeches and policy papers have received little sustained attention." (Kuus, 2011b: 423). In his afterword to an edited collection on geopolitics, Nigel Thrift (2000) too highlighted an engagement with the material

world and bureaucratic procedure as one of the lacunae of critical geopolitics. Even where research has penetrated the boundaries of organizations, such as in the work on the inside lives of organizations, it has not proposed an explicit concept of how social processes work to constitute organizations as geopolitical actors. Or to remain within the metaphor of the black box: it has lifted the lid of the box, but has not theorized the mechanism inside. It is to this task that the paper now turns.

Thinking of organization as ordering socio-material networks

At the most fundamental level, organizations can be thought of as sets of related elements. Organizational theorist Robert Cooper conceptualized organization as "appropriation of order out of disorder" (Cooper, 1986: 328), as making the undecidable decidable. This concept is echoed in John Law's influential *Organizing Modernity* (Law, 1994: 1), where he defines organizations as arising out of a process of ordering, of arranging elements in networks. Organizations are not monolithic entities but consist of a plethora of smaller elements that have been ordered to stay in place at least for some time and make organizations emerge as actors. Treating an organization as a singular construct "is to miss most of how it functions" (Weick, 2001: 39). Ordering does not have to result in a stable order, as John Law insists. In fact, the networks that form organizations are precarious, ephemeral accomplishments that can be overturned and need to be stabilized constantly. Organizations are in a continuous state of becoming, orienting themselves towards a goal or some point of reference which, however, remains forever elusive (Hernes, 2008: 40; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This observation moves *ordering* as a practice, rather than *organization* as an outcome, to the center of attention.

Organizational action is often rather haphazard and far removed from the coherent rationality that is imputed when organizations are viewed as unified geopolitical actors from the outside and scholars try to make sense of their action ex-post (Weick, 2001: 37). Starbuck (1982: 16) remarks that

> very rarely, if ever, does an organization begin action by perceiving a problem, then define this problem carefully, next generate possible actions solely because they might solve the stated problem, and finally, select a single course of action on the ground that it ought to be the best way to solve the problem.

So while organizations are 'action generators' (Starbuck, 1983), the action is more often than not the outcome of processes that do not follow one set rationality. The inside lives of organizations exhibit a significant degree of messiness and are characterized by constant attempts to create temporary order out of chaos. Even in the EU, for example, an organization that is often perceived as the archetypal ordered bureaucracy, bureaucratic practices are not necessarily logical, but rather practical and pragmatic in the sense that they produce a desired outcome in a particular situation (Kuus, 2011a). Such messiness exists even more so in times of crisis, when decisions need to be made "on the fly" without time for extensive deliberation or planning (Mountz, 2004: 339). Organizations, then, must be able to order at least some relations to be able to act, but at the same time will always fail to produce a complete, lasting order.

What exactly is ordered in the networks that form organizations? What substance are they made of? Furthering the thrust of Philo and Parr's (2000; see also Davies, 2000; Holloway, 2000) call to combine institutional alertness with ANT, I would like to argue here that for understanding how organizations emerge as powerful actors in space we need to see them as socio-*material* networks – ensembles of human *and* material elements that work together towards a shared mission. This focus on "heterogeneous engineering" (Law, 1992: 381) is a departure from most work on networks and organizations that conceptualizes them as social relations between human actors (e.g. Nohria and Eccles, 1992). The importance of both human and material elements in constituting organizations becomes evident, when we consider what organizations need in order to fulfill their mission. Let us take the European Central Bank as an example: it consists of human agents such as analysts, economists, office clerks and cooks, but also of material things such as the gold reserve, the algorithms to compute inflation, the computer systems that coordinate interbank lending, the skyscraper landmark building that serves as the headquarters in Frankfurt or coffee machines – all of which are indispensable for the European Central Bank to emerge as an actor.

Deleuze's concept of assemblage shares many features with that of socio-material network. For him, assemblage is "a multiplicity constituted by heterogeneous terms

and which establishes liaisons, relations between them" (Deleuze, 2007 [1977]: 52). Its emphasis on emergent, contingent actorness, distributed agencies and socio-material practices instead of resultant formation is an apt description of organization as I have outlined it here (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; McFarlane, 2009, 2011). Invoking this notion of assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari describe the state, for example, as a product of relating certain heterogeneous elements, while leaving out others, to form a consistent and durable, though changeable, whole. For them, the state is

> a phenomenon of *intraconsistency*. It makes points *resonate* together, … very diverse points of order, geographic, ethnic, linguistic, moral, economic, technological particularities. … In retaining given elements, it necessarily cuts off their relations with other elements, which become exterior (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 433).

The state itself creates a heterogeneous, socio-material assemblage that secures its power and thus becomes more than the sum of its parts (Mitchell, 1991, 1999; Painter, 2006).

The process of organizing as ordering thus never aims at humans alone. Organizations derive their agency by enrolling a multitude of humans and things and making them work towards a mission. Agency is not something pre-given, but a product and effect of an association of humans and non-humans (Law, 1994: 11). It does not reside with specific individuals – pundits, politicians, commanders or strategists – who are ascribed a privileged position in the making of geopolitics or in a priori powerful centers, but is distributed in relations. As Latour (2005: 46) puts it: "an actor is what is *made* to act by many others". Such a perspective does not ignore uneven power relations; it rather posits that power differentials need to be explained as an outcome and effect of the associations within a socio-material network: "No one, no thing, no class, no gender, can have power unless a set of relations is constituted and held in place" (Law, 1991: 18). Big entities become powerful because they have stabilized and aligned a number of smaller entities which can act as their delegates (Callon, 1991).

Tracing associations: research strategies

Organizations become macro-actors because they have stabilized the links between different elements and make them impenetrable as black boxes that function on their behalf, "wip[ing] away any traces of their construction, presenting themselves … as being indivisible and solid" (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005: 7). The strategy for researching organizations involves uncovering and tracing precisely the paths of associations that have been wiped away and reconstructing how networks are assembled, much in the sense of O'Tuathail's (1994: 530) geo-graphing as "interminable tracing". To this end, researchers need to become immersed in the network and attuned to the processes of making connections, bringing to bear the ethnographic sensibility that Megoran (2006a) has advocated for political geography on the assemblage of networks. In so doing, we need to remain aware that the degree of order of organizations may vary: the actor-networks of social movements might exhibit much less order and more flux than the United States Central Command. Periods of organizational change too might produce considerable messiness in otherwise mostly ordered organizations.

Following traces, collecting evidence and charting who connects with whom and through what does not mean that analysis must remain within the boundaries of one particular organization. Indeed, if we understand organizations as the result of practices of ordering that establish associations between heterogeneous elements, the boundaries of organizations are porous. We must thus remain agnostic to what we analyze, for this is whatever is brought into the ordered network. Some work on social movements has explored this empirical direction recently with calls to examine how transnational networks bind together heterogeneous elements across places to muster support for their cause (e.g. Featherstone, 2008; McFarlane, 2006). Routledge's (2008) tracing of the global network of grassroots movements can act as a point of inspiration here. In his research, he follows the contested and ephemeral relational processes that generate associations, shedding light on experiential, emotional and bodily practices, the cataloguing and discussion of documents, the attending of conferences and so on. He reflects on how the circulation of objects, people and texts creates solidarities that enable action and how the researcher not only observes associations but participates in weaving new ones.

The attention to micro-contexts does not imply that the research is limited to those contexts. In contrast, Latour (1993) insists that "instead of having to choose between the local and the global view, the notion of network allows us to think of a global entity – a highly connected one – which nevertheless remains continuously local ... we simply follow how a given element becomes strategic through the number of connections it commands, and how it loses its importance when losing its connections" (Latour, 1997: 372). By keeping the study of networks at the ground level, we are asked recognize that the large and powerful is but assembled from the mundane and everyday (Callon and Latour, 1981; Law, 2004). Such a sensibility resonates with feminist geopolitics, in which shifting the analysis from the level of abstract aggregates such as the nation-state to the level of the body and the quotidian has been a recurrent theme (Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Mountz, 2004). Mountz (2004: 325), for example, advocates re-introducing a focus on the constitutive bodies of individuals that make up the state and other organizations to expose the holes in the smooth black box narratives of powerful organizations.

Besides ethnographic research, texts of various sorts can provide an alternative access route, in particular in view of their increasing availability in the digital world. Derrida (1996) in his *Archive Fever* predicted profound judicial and political implications from the instantaneous production and dissemination of records that is associated with e-mail and digitization. And indeed, the WikiLeaks Cablegate punctured the glossy veneer of diplomatic niceties and public statements, and made accessible something of the underbelly in the conduct of international affairs. In a similar vein, the introduction of freedom of information legislation in an ever larger number of countries over the past decades has opened access to archives that were not available in the public realm and to internal documents of many governmental organizations. But at the same time documents, no matter how detailed or vivid, always already contain a pre-selection of the associations that their authors considered noteworthy. Derrida (1996: 11) notes that "*there is no archive … without outside*." The archive, through the inclusion and exclusion of certain materials, adjudicates fact and fiction, truth and falsity, visibility and invisibility and in so doing "archivization produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida,

1996: 16). Just as we need to take into account and render transparent how the ethnographic researcher affects his or her reconstruction of associations, so do we have to grapple with the visibilities and invisibilities produced through the archive.

It is worth stressing that treating organizations as socio-material black boxes comes with an unavoidable set of drawbacks and produces its own silences. While it preserves an openness to who or what is involved in establishing relations, it turns a blind eye to the possibility that some network configurations emerge to buttress particular interests (the *cui bono* question) and that some elements might be more able than others to build associations. The agnostic approach towards how powerful actors are assembled obscures that there might be differential abilities to forge durable links. Another problematic aspect is the potentially infinite complexity that emerges in the tracing of associations and opening of black boxes (Lepawsky and Mather, 2011). This requires a decision where to cut the network and when to stop the tracing. In practice, researchers will have to make a strategic choice which black boxes to leave unopened, not least because of pragmatic constraints such as available resources and the word limit on manuscripts. A final caveat applies to the iconoclastic ambition that seeks to do away with the abstracted terms attached to the myriad black boxes in our lives. Opening up classificatory systems comes at the price of fostering understanding about regularities and higher order phenomena *on the basis* of black boxes. Scholars may well choose to operate with the black box of the organization to examine phenomena that occur at that level and intervene in public debate that employs these abstracted categories (Ferguson, 2006: 1-7). The tracing of socio-material networks thus is never an alternative to black-boxed research, but a complement which comes with its own fortes and blind spots.

Outlining a research agenda

Viewing organizations as socio-material networks encourages us to unravel the multiple and heterogeneous associations through which they come to be and evolve as geopolitical actors. In the following, I would like to outline four possible nodes of research to expand work in critical geopolitics along the lines of this perspective: the circulation of geopolitical ideas, the production of geopolitics, governance at a distance and technologies of geopolitics. *Figure 2* sketches a study map of

empirical themes around these four nodes. It is important to note that these avenues bleed into each other, as indicated by the two-way arrows in the figure: ideas need to circulate to beget geopolitical action; technologies are crucial for governing at distance. However, I separate them out here according to the main emphasis, not as discrete strands.

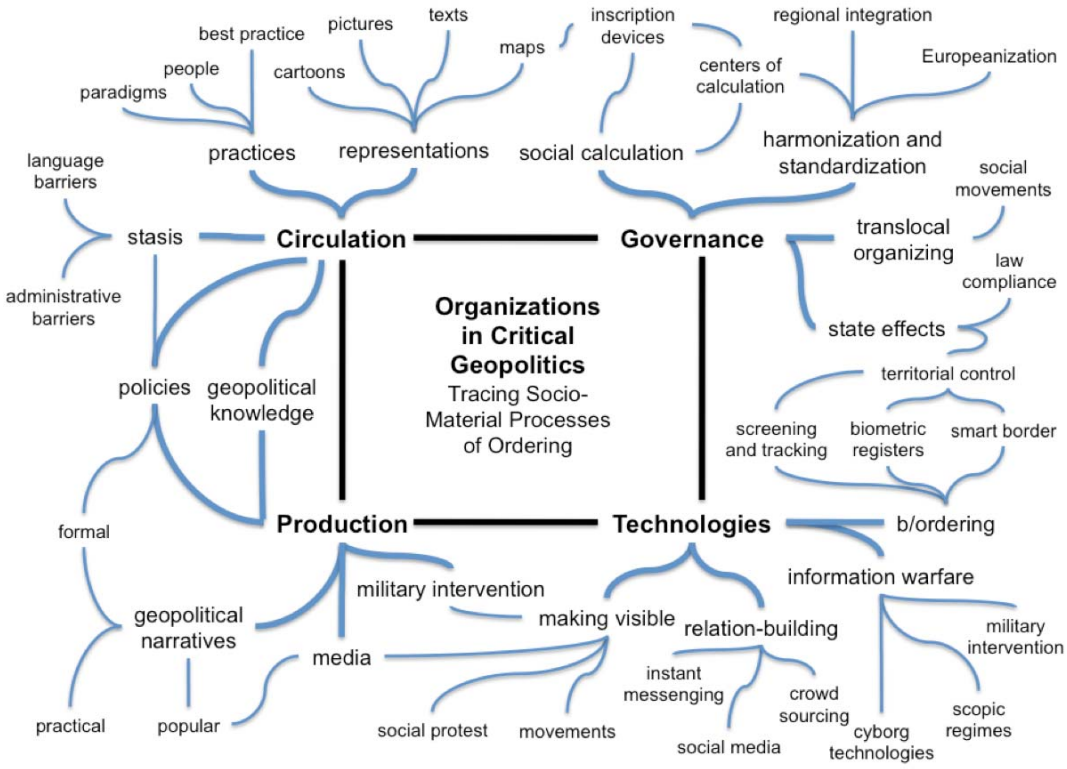

Figure 2: Study map of tracing organizations as socio-material processes of ordering in critical geopolitics

a) The circulation of geopolitical ideas and representations

Geopolitical ideas and representations travel, inscribed in documents or carried by humans. Sidaway (2008: 44) emphasizes that "in all cases classical geopolitics rested on the *international* circulation of geopolitical ideas" and Dodds and Sidaway (1994: 518) claim that geopolitics is dependent on the "production and dissemination of strategic texts and maps". Halford Mackinder's ideas have spun out beyond the circuits of Anglo-American geopolitics to the countries that are the object of his analysis (Megoran, 2004). In inter-war Europe, terms like 'heartland'

or ‘pan-regions’ regularly cropped up in debates about geopolitics (Sidaway, 2000). Concepts such as human security have gained wide-spread currency and circulate within international organizations and government bodies to legitimize interventions (Hyndman, 2004: 313). In the popular realm, too, representations circulate globally and are appropriated and instrumentalized by media organizations and political organizations in the course, creating a global audience, as the case of the Muhammad cartoons demonstrated (Olesen, 2007).

A focus on the circulation of geopolitical ideas takes up the emphasis on connection and movement in the weaving of the socio-material networks that form organizations and link them to each other. Humans and objects act as carriers of ideas and establish associations and alliances across space: textbooks tie scientific communities together (Barnes, 2002), mobile experts spread policies and best practices across the globe (Larner and Laurie, 2010). These ‘immutable mobiles’ circulate through organizations and bring them into an ever wider network. This process allows them to speak in the same language about the same things and share the same concerns. Organizations spread geopolitical ideas: think tanks market them as their main product, media organizations broadcast them to their listeners and viewers, international organizations negotiate them with their members and clients, and social movements depend on their dissemination for mobilization (see *Figure 2*).

According to Said (1983: 226-227), there are four stages in the traveling of ideas. First, the point of origin where a particular set of relations enabled the birth of an idea. Second, the distance traversed in moving to a new destination. Third, the conditions of acceptance or resistance at the point of destination and, finally, the transformation and adaptation of an idea to its new context, since ideas inevitably change as they become tied up in different socio-material networks. Circulation therefore is never “transport without transformation” (Latour, 1999: 15). These stages are of particular relevance for exploring further the strand of research that deals with geopolitical representations of and by organizations. They suggest to chart the genesis and trace the routes of ideas such as their inscriptions into maps and policy papers and subsequent dissemination. Where do geopolitical ideas come

from and how are they authored? What are the material conduits of ideas? How do opinions form in newspaper editorial offices or how do TV stations decide how to frame a geopolitical issue? Who can set the agenda and act as gatekeeper? Tracing circulation in this way asks for a particular openness to the unexpected twists and turns of circulation: ideas not only travel to unexpected destinations but may also be put to unexpected uses (Perry, 1995: 36).

For all the concern with circulation, however, as *Figure 2* indicates this avenue also needs to remain attentive to the other side of circulation: stasis. Certain ideas do not travel, but remain stuck and stop dead in their tracks. Illuminating the reasons for the failure to connect parts together to an agential whole that pursues a certain idea is just as important as exploring successful circulation. Such a sudden halt can occur, for instance, when ideas need to be translated between languages. Much of what is currently discussed under the heading of global ideas relies on English as a medium of communication. But what about those social contexts where English is not the lingua franca?

b) The production of geopolitics

From the focus on circulation follows a second focus on the production of geopolitics. For, as we have seen, the forging of associations through circulation is critical for linking together the parts and creating organizations as actors. The production of geopolitics encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from the construction of geopolitical knowledge (Agnew, 2007) and narratives across the three realms of popular, practical and formal geopolitics to the use of military force (*Figure 2*). This avenue would address how certain modes of geopolitical calculation and reasoning facilitate particular orderings of organizations that result in the production of geopolitics. How do office routines contribute to opening paths for certain courses of action, while making others more difficult? What are the organizational sites of geopolitical knowledge and policy production? How are geopolitical truths constructed and made durable? Explaining the production of geopolitics in terms of associations forged and associations severed would help us understand why particular paths were pursued and others discarded.

Iver Neumann (2007) provides an intriguing example for this kind of research with his study of the practices of speech writing in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Though not framed in the theoretical vocabulary of actor-network theory, his ethnographic research charts the socio-material network that integrates the Ministry as an organization by following along the travels of several speeches that he needed to craft during his working stint there. He describes how the integrating object, the speech, changes with every element that it brings into the network and how, by aligning the interests of different departments, it comes to assemble the Foreign Ministry as a unified actor from the smaller parts. At the same time, he also recounts how his attempts at speech writing created disruptions in the socio-material networks, whenever other departments felt that a draft did not have the expected content that would represent particular interests. Neumann traces the associations a speech weaves as a mobile object and takes the reader along in the journey of different drafts as he delivers them to other people's pigeonholes or walks across to the adjacent building to consult with representatives from other departments.

Media organizations are another case in point to illustrate the importance of forging associations to result in action – the production of a newspaper article, a news feature or a podcast. Their raison d'être is connecting elements together, making some things visible and, in the course of this, concealing others (Cooper, 2005). The process of assembling into a product information from distant and disparate sources is what constitutes them. This process depends on a complex ordering of human and non-human elements alike: reporters in the field as well as cameras; editors as well as printing presses; newscasters and fiber-optic cables. The ordering effects of media are also ephemeral and depend on the constant reiteration of the ordering practices to instantiate themselves: because a newspaper or a news broadcast need to be assembled daily, they constantly face the threat of disappearance if this assembling fails. If they do not re-connect and re-perform associations, they will not be able to act.

c) Governance at a distance

Becoming attuned to traveling objects and how they forge associations allows us to think afresh about the spatial reach of organizational power and the art of governing at a distance. "Producing geopower involves the construction and distribution of objects at a distance", as Thrift (2000: 381) remarks. Immutable mobiles can circulate as material objects and create associations that extend socio-material arrangements and allow projecting power across space (Callon, 1991). Latour and Woolgar (1986: 51) speak of inscription devices that produce diagrams, maps, figures and so on, which make certain things visible and can be further processed and used (see *Figure 2*). The conduct of government and wielding of organizational authority, too, depend on such inscription devices (Krause, 2010). They render legible and calculable that which then can be governed and brought home, "making social processes visible as objects of deliberation for political authority, and shaping and coordinating behavior across time and space" (Walters, 2002: 108). In this vein, organizations become centers of calculation that can control and intervene in distant places without having to move themselves by either sending out delegates on their behalf or bringing people and places back to the center (Hannah, 2009; Murdoch and Ward, 1997).

This is what is at stake, both within and outside EU borders. The European Commission, indeed the more than 40,000 staff of the EU, would be powerless without an elaborate socio-material apparatus of governance. Inscription devices shape geopolitical authority and help order the EU so as to enable it to act (Walters, 2002). Harmonization and standardization processes, such as Europeanization, are a good example of how humans and objects become meshed up in the projection of power (Barry, 2001; Rovnyi and Bachmann, 2012). Europeanization in the strict sense is what Ladrech (1994: 69) calls an 'organizational logic' – organizations such as governments, companies and NGOs adapting to new standards and environments. Consider as an example Andrew Barry's account of EU harmonization, which describes EU agency as manifest in delegation:

> As an agent of government, the Commission seeks to operate not by administering anything directly, but rather by aligning the diverse powers of existing national professional, private

> and public organisations. The European institutions are only able to lay out general directives which delegate responsibility for others to act. In so far as harmonisation has occurred, it is because Europe delegates to an array of relatively unknown organisations with acronyms like ETSI, CEN, CENELEC, Afnor and BSI (Barry, 2001: 73)

At the same time, this governing at a distance does not occur without friction: it creates opposition and counter-movements. Formal adoption of rules does not mean that they are followed. What, then, does it take to implement a single and centralized police structure in Bosnia (Juncos, 2011)? What are the instruments and what are the barriers in implementing a consistent set of migration policies (Menz, 2011)? Through what documents and organizational processes are EU biodiversity policies (Börzel and Buzogány, 2010), electricity policies (Bauby and Varone, 2007) or the acquis communautaire (Hille and Knill, 2006) adopted, transformed, re-interpreted and resisted?

The entanglement of humans and material objects is also central in conceptualizing the state as an organization that governs at a distance (*Figure 2*). Schueth (2012) demonstrates the added value of this perspective in his account of the mundane techniques and practices forming an assemblage that enabled post-Soviet Georgia to considerably raise the rate of tax compliance. The Georgian state enrolled its citizens with the help of instruments such as cash registers to log and make calculable revenues, in the course redefining the state/private distinction through making tax compliance a matter of individual responsibility vis-à-vis the state. While this successful assemblage helped expand the organizational capacities of the state with regard to tax collection, it at the same time produced counterstrategies of resistance and evasion. Even as they reinforce the state as a powerful organization, attempts at making particular orderings durable and entrenching state power with the help of material objects remain thus incomplete and open to challenge. Such challenge can, for example, emanate from social movements, which, just like the state, can be described as heterogeneous assemblages, attempting to enroll people and objects into their own networks and linking across sites "materials, practices, designs, knowledge, personal stories, local histories and preferences, and an infrastructure of resources, fundraising, and state and donor connections" (McFarlane, 2009: 563).

d) Technologies of ordering

Geopolitical action affected by organizations is often contingent on the use of technological devices. The so-called revolution in military affairs, that is the informationalization through information and communication technologies such as remote control and remote sensing, global communication networks, global satellite positioning, simulation and telematics makes technology an integral part in constituting powerful actors or even "geoinformational" (Ó Tuathail, 2000: 171) or "technological" (Barry, 2001: 42) empires. "Information is no longer just a matter of intelligence … [but] a matter of routine, incorporated into the weaponry and decision-making systems themselves" (Ek, 2000: 850). This becomes evident in Gregory's (2010) account of the mapping practices of the Multi-National Force Iraq and the organizational "techno-cultural apparatus" (p. 266) to visualize activities in Baghdad. This apparatus rationalizes military action through instituting a particular scopic regime that allowed seeing what was there, "but also what was *not* there" (2010: 267). It ordered the disordered, thus making it able to be acted upon, with the help of technological devices.

New and conventional media, too, depend on a wide range of technologies for their work of delivering news and reports to people's screens. Webcasts, on-site live transmissions, embedded journalism and so on would be unthinkable without an elaborate technological apparatus. The policing of borders is contingent on the enrollment of scanners, biometrics and information technology to screen and track those who cross the border and sift out those who will be denied entry (*Figure 2*). Such "smart borders", as the US calls them, utilize technology to extend the arm of the state and monitor, standardize and direct the flows of goods and people (Popescu, 2012; Walters, 2006). In this technologization of border regimes, the various border agencies, whether it is Frontex in the EU or United States Border Patrol, are increasingly intertwined with their technological apparatuses, which have become so integral that they come to define the organizations' tasks. In the course of this, the boundaries between private and public organizations have become fuzzy as private contractors with specialized know-how have been brought on board in the development and policing of new border regimes (Amoore, 2006).

While the use of technology can further consolidate the black box of already powerful organizations, it can also enable actors that would otherwise appear marginal to enroll a host of others for support. The videos of the Arab Spring uprisings, shot with mobile phones and distributed via YouTube and Facebook, were created by emergent oppositional organizations and individuals, but garnered an extensive global audience and support for the cause (Chen, 2011; Khondker, 2011). Communication technologies can be used to bring people together for charitable and not-for-profit causes, such as the Salsa online organizing platform, which offers contact relationship management, online fundraising, advocacy campaigning and other tools. But they can also be used for plotting against public order. In the London riots of 2011 BlackBerry Messenger served as the primary channel to rally people and spread news about impending strikes. In contrast to Twitter and Facebook, which are public and require more expensive smart phones with data plans for mobile access, BlackBerry handsets were cheaper and messaging free and private. This case is a fitting illustration for the movements of inclusion and exclusion through which relations are ordered and made durable: BlackBerry Messenger was an effective means of enrolling those in the network who had the same type of handheld and were given PIN access numbers, while at the same time keeping out others, such as the police or the general public, and preventing them from severing or pre-empting this relation-building (Baker, 2012).

Understanding organizations as arising from processes of socio-material ordering alerts us that technology functions not only as a passive conduit of human intentions, but co-produces geopolitical action. Technological devices bring geopolitical realities into being, shape what we can see and not see, know and not know, and enable ordering processes in the first place. As Latour suggests, however, such technologies are not easily enrolled, "always resist[ing] and mak[ing] a shamble of our pretensions to control" (Latour, 2000: 116). They may malfunction, such as early warning systems that are meant to protect against missiles but misdiagnose incoming objects, or biometric screening software that misclassifies ordinary citizens as terrorists. Or technologies may be enrolled in the network of another organization, such as when viruses are launched against computer networks or internet platforms are shut down to curb the spread of

information, as happened in Egypt during the 2011 uprisings. Either way, however, they are crucial constituents in shaping geopolitical ordering and the emergence and consolidation of organizations.

Coda

If we accept the importance of organizations for critical geopolitics, it is time that we open the black box and start to think more systematically and imaginatively about how to integrate them into our research. 'Opening the black box' means two things here: First, extending our field of vision to the constant processes of ordering that create and maintain organizations and, second, tracing organizations as socio-material networks. The first aspect takes a performative perspective on organization as an iterative, precarious accomplishment. It calls on us to embrace a mode of research that has recently received increasing attention in critical geopolitics with the move towards a more people- and practice-centered approach that explores the situated making, interpreting and communicating of geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Müller, 2008). Geopolitics emerges from ordering processes that occur in and at the same time shape a specific social and geographical context, which is not just an optional background but a constitutive element of them. With respect to organizations, this is a claim that is just beginning to be staked and prospected (e.g. Kuus, 2010, 2011b) but remains to be explored further through examining what it takes for organizations to emerge as geopolitical actors.

The second moment of thinking of organizations as socio-material networks, however, goes one step further than just advocating a grounded approach to organizational practices. It argues that we need to take into account the constitutive role of the material world when tracing organizational ordering. This material component is what makes networks durable and allows the production of agency. It is in the inscriptions that manifest geopolitical ideas, in the technologies that make territories calculable or the delegates that allow organizations to extend their power across space. Foucault (1979: 26) speaks of a 'micro-physics of power' and the term 'physics' points to the need to be more mindful of the particular role of material objects in constituting organizations as actors. Instead of locating agency in texts or attributing it to human agents – statesmen, politicians, experts – a socio-

material perspective encourages us to examine how material objects are implicated in making geopolitical power possible or impossible and organizations powerful or powerless.

Critical geopolitics has much to gain from engaging with organizations through this lens. For its core concern with the analysis of geopolitical narratives, it opens a perspective that points us beyond the content of representations and looks at the modes of their production. In so doing, it conceives of the subjectivating power of geopolitical discourse not as a purely symbolic force but as emerging from a socio-material apparatus. It also offers a distinct take on the antecedents of geopolitical action, locating them in the successful enrolment of elements in a network. Finally, the sensitivity to the material world provides a handle for thinking about the role of technologies to produce geopolitical inscriptions that serve to establish associations and the potential to govern at a distance with the help of immutable mobiles.

Opening the black box of the organization therefore means tracing the ways in which the non-human and the human become bound up with each other and constitute organizations as geopolitical actors. Such 'trail-sniffing', as Latour (2005: 9) calls it, tends to make research unpredictable and more often than not produces rather unruly empirical material. Opening the black box of the organization thus is much like unpacking your moving boxes: it is time-consuming, tedious and requires much patience – but in their new arrangement the same things end up looking very different from the way they did before.

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